



Quaker Heritage



Religious Society of Friends

The faith that guided Herbert Hoover throughout his long life as a statesman and public servant came from the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. Many of the early pioneers who settled in the West Branch area were members of the Religious Society of Friends. Both sets of Herbert Hoover’s grandparents were among these early settlers. His parents, Hulda and Jesse Hoover, met as young people growing up in the community. They married in 1870 and worshipped in the Friends Meetinghouse now located on the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site.

Foundations

The Religious Society of Friends was founded in 17th century England by George Fox. Fox preached rejection of the hierarchy, dogma, and other “empty forms” of the established churches of his day. He believed that an element of God’s spirit is present in all human beings and that turning to the “Inner Light” in meditation allows direct communication with God for everyone without the intercession of clergy. He and his followers referred to themselves as “Friends of Truth,” or simply “Friends.” At their meetings, Friends worshipped in silence, waiting upon the Inner Light, speaking only when they felt moved by the Holy Spirit.

Friends believe that social action and worship have no dividing lines. In all aspects of life, they observe “testimonies” aimed at “right, plain living, in humble worship of God.” The testimonies are not written documents but shared understandings arising from the central idea that there is “that of God” in everyone, and each worshipper interprets them according to individual conscience. Friends’ main commitments are to the testimonies of simplicity, peace, honesty, responsibility to community, and equality.

History

In the early days, the testimony to the equality of all people led Quakers to refuse to take off their hats in the presence of “superiors” and address everyone with *thee* and *thou* (the address of the common people) without regard to rank. They called for improved living conditions in prisons and worked for the protection of the mentally ill. The concern for honesty led Quakers to refuse to take oaths. Taking an oath implied different levels of truth, and they believed you should be completely truthful all the time. Friends are perhaps most widely known for the peace testimony. They consider violence in

any form to be violence against “the Christ within” and refuse to go to war.

These differences caused frequent conflict with the English government, and Fox was often jailed. Once, when hauled into court, he suggested that the judge “quake and tremble at the word of the Lord.” The judge referred to Fox as a “quaker.” The nickname, once used in contempt, was adopted by Fox’s followers and has become the popular name for the Religious Society of Friends.

West Branch Meeting

Individual congregations are called Meetings. Two meetings for worship were held during the week, on First Day and Fourth Day. Quakers referred to the days of the week and months of the year by numbers to avoid using names of pagan origin (such as Thursday, named for the Norse god Thor.) During Hoover’s boyhood, this was an unprogrammed meeting for worship. There was no minister, no planned pattern for the service, and no music. Those who came to worship sat in “silent, expectant waiting” before the Lord. Any persons who felt moved by the Spirit to share their thoughts

rose and spoke from their seats in the meeting. Those who spoke often and were acknowledged as being gifted in insight were recognized by being made recorded ministers. Hulda Hoover, Herbert’s mother, was a recorded minister of her Meeting.

Men and women sat separately, encouraging individual worship and full participation for women. Children attended the meetings also, boys sitting with the men and girls with the women. “*The long hours of meeting awaiting the*

West Branch Meeting (continued)	<i>spirit to move someone,” Hoover wrote, “may not have been recreation, but it was strong training in patience.”</i> Infants who disturbed the silence of the meeting were taken to a “cry room” attached to the women’s side of the house. Once a month, men and women held separate monthly business meetings. Each Monthly Meeting belonged to an area Quarterly Meeting that meet every three months, and the Quarterly Meeting	belonged in turn to a Yearly Meeting. Queries and advices printed from the Discipline of the Yearly Meeting were read at Monthly Meeting as reminders of the Friends’ insight and opportunities for self-examination. An example from the 1863 Discipline of Ohio Yearly Meeting (also used by Iowa Friends when this area was being settled): “Do Friends maintain love towards each other, as becomes our Christian profession? Are tale-bearing and detraction discouraged? And, when differences arise, are endeavors used speedily to end them?”
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Home Life	The Friends placed high value on education, thrift, and individual enterprise. In a memoir of his youth, Hoover noted that individual Bible reading was an important part of the Quaker concept of education and that he had read the Bible in daily stints from cover to cover before he left Iowa at the age of eleven.	Meals in Quaker homes began with a period of silent prayer. Breakfast was followed with a chapter of the Bible, followed by a period of silent worship. First Day evenings were often times for family gatherings, popping corn or shelling walnuts and eating them all together. Children were read stories from the Bible and works of science, nature, and religion that would instruct and inspire.
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Activism	Throughout their history, Friends have faced struggles in maintaining the testimonies. The peace testimony especially has caused conflicts within individuals and families. Because of their strong stand against slavery, many Quakers felt moved to serve during the Civil War. Most worked in hospitals or helped slaves escape to freedom via the Underground Railroad, a series of routes and hiding places organized by opponents of slavery to transport fugitive slaves to safety. Herbert Hoover’s uncle Doctor Henry John Minthorn was a driver for the Underground Railroad. As did some other Quaker men, however, he also served as a soldier. In 1864 he left college to enlist in the Union army. His daughter stated that he “enlisted without parental	consent” and “returned home ill and without honor among his family or The Society of Friends.” The Religious Society of Friends was also in the forefront of the women’s rights movement. Quaker activist Lucretia Mott helped organize i the first women’s rights convention in 1848. Hulda Hoover addressed justice for women in her ministry, writing “This is the next great question that agitates the public mind of our state and I only need to say let a woman be left a widow and have anything to do with business and she will emphatically be on the side of equal suffrage.”
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Legacy	Of the Religious Society of Friends, Hoover wrote, “ <i>We have here a religious faith starting as a protest, marching through these ten or twelve generations. . .bound together by no ritual, no symbolism, no creed, no clergy or bishop, no hierarchy. This religious faith, now of over three hundred years of descent, has never embraced more than a handful of people; it has suffered long periods of calumny and persecution, but in time it has come to enjoy a universality of high esteem. . .the very name of the Quaker has become an instinct in the public mind of integrity, industry, and charity.</i> ”	Today there are about 300,000 members of the Religious Society of Friends worldwide, 125,000 of whom live in North America. Many meetings continue to practice unprogrammed silent worship, while others have pastor-led programmed services of Bible readings, sermons, and hymn singing. Though practice varies, all Quakers share the belief in the guidance of the Inner Light and in individual and community growth through observance of the testimonies in harmony with the Holy Spirit.
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